

Ideology in Cold Blood: A Reading of Lucan's Civil War.(book review)

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By Shadi Bartsch. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000. x + 224 pages.

For Dante (and his guide Virgil) the epic poets Lucan and Statius were a major part of the glory of Rome and the western European tradition. But their fame has not survived like that of the Aeneid, and the so-called "Silver Latin epic" has been seen for many generations as an eccentric taste even for professional Latinists. Indeed Lucan's epic is an extreme case, since both the Aeneid and Thebaid are set in the heroic period of myth, whereas Lucan's narrative dealt with recent history which was still politically dangerous material. It could be claimed that all three poets wrote about civil war: but Aeneas's reluctant war with the Latins was civil only in the sense that Virgil's contemporaries saw all of Italy as one people, and the impiety, or "wrongness" of this war comes primarily from its origin in treaty violation in opposition to the fate that was Rome's manifest destiny. In contrast, Statius's Theban war was driven by the inhuman mutual hatred of Oedipus's sons, the tyrant Ereodes, and the exiled Polynices, leading an allied army against his own brother and his own city. But Lucan, whose war happened in the full light of history and had been narrated both by its protagonist Caesar and the Augustan historian Livy, could also call his war "worse than civil," since Caesar, the aggressor, was warring against forces led by his own son-in-law, Pompey.

What does civil war evoke for us? For Americans the bitter conflict of North and South, states originally independent and independently governed with different economic bases. This war is already further in the past than the century between Caesar's death and Lucan's poem. The English civil war was ideological--an attempted revolution against a corrupt monarchy, driven by religious dissent and regional disparities: even the Spanish civil war of the nineteen-thirties was based on ideology, sending idealists like George Orwell to fight for the elected communist government against reactionary forces backed by foreign powers.

Rome's civil war was something else again. There was talk of liberty on both sides, but no vision of society was involved. Caesar's motive was as much fear of prosecution, once he dismissed his Gallic army and returned to Rome, as a drive to autocracy. In turn, those who feared him were privileged leaders of a ruling class eager to retain power, propelling before them Rome's great commander of a previous decade, now a figurehead past his best. The common soldier or civilian had little stake in the oligarchic commonwealth (*res publica*) and was ready to support the victorious and charismatic Caesar. The real conflict was within the elite of senators and magistrates, families divided in partisanship, who would confront their brothers or sons-in-law face-to-face in battle at Pharsalus. This was the horror that made Lucan call the war "a powerful people turning against its own entrails with its victorious right hand" (1.2-3).

From Homer onwards, ancient epic had delighted in vivid portrayal of wounding and death, but with Lucan comes a new fascination with violation of the body, both on the

battlefield, and away from it. In the last twenty years, some of the most innovative critics (Ralph Johnson, Glenn Most, John Henderson, and his pupil Jamie Masters), have applied to Lucan two approaches of modern criticism: preoccupation with the body and its boundaries, and deconstructive analysis which searches out inconsistencies in the text as evidence of an author's will to subvert his own stated purpose.

As Bartsch makes clear in her introduction, she is not content with this partial interpretation, which leaves some of the most complex critical problems of Lucan's narrative unresolved. But she begins by retelling the evidence for the poet's violence toward both his characters and his language.

There are unhistorical episodes in Lucan's Civil War, such as the necromancy of Erichtho and the menagerie of Libyan snakes that inflict disgusting deaths on Cato's expedition, which aim to shock, but go to such extremes that they defy belief and provoke laughter and embarrassment. Indeed, they have embarrassed most of all orthodox critics concerned to defend Lucan's seriousness of purpose and artistic skill: ideal fodder for the deconstructionists, they have led believers in the passionate ideological Lucan like myself to pass over them in silence for lack of a justification. Bartsch's long opening chapter combines analysis of the grotesque content of such scenes (she rightly rejects the standard attribution of such lapses to the poet's youth or to rhetoric) with study of Lucan's formal distortion of language. Characteristically, his syntax inverts the relationship of agent and victim: she demonstrates how this blurs the whole concept of agency; it is not the purposive soldier, but some part of his body, that gives or receives the wound.

This chapter, focused on the poem's grotesque and shocking aspects, occupies one third of the book. It is not the side of Lucan that led lovers of liberty or haters of absolutism to admire him, and it may deter readers from continuing. Even the second chapter still engages with previous critical approaches, concentrating on the poet of paradox familiar from recent studies, together with a phenomenon Bartsch calls "doubling." The doubling in part represents the historical doubling of competing organs of government: but it is made more cynical by the poet's demonstration that these opposites are as meaningless as the paradox by which virtue in civil war is itself criminal, and Pompey's piety is culpable, because it brings the loss of freedom that results from Caesar's victory. In this world, Caesar is "more the expression of some force behind history than a mere human" (62-63) and the gods are not--as is often suggested--denied, but alternately treated as impotent and indifferent (108-13).

Finally, near the end of chapter 2, Bartsch releases us from the last generation's nightmarish reading: "the existence of the (subversive) narrator cannot be doubted--and yet to concentrate on him alone is to submerge the other Lucan; the partisan, the hoper, the vivid presence in the poem that manages to believe in the possibility of a different future in spite of himself" (65). For the rest of her study, Bartsch will provide an intense and thorough scrutiny of themes and modes of narration in Lucan, illuminated by wide-ranging citations from the political writings and theory of our own century, notably Hannah Arendt on totalitarianism and witnesses of both the hopeless conflict in Vietnam and the unrelieved oppression of the holocaust. But her approach is gradual.

As a pivotal third chapter, she offers a careful study not of Lucan's full-blooded villain, Caesar, nor of his republican hero Cato (who joins in hostilities fully aware that neither side cares for liberty), but of the too-human Pompey. The Pompey of the narrative is true to our historical sources: Cicero's letters of the time and historians using the eyewitness record of Pollio have transmitted a detailed indictment of Pompey's weaknesses as a man and a commander. Lucan does not spare him, from his hollow boasting as he retreats from Italy in book 2 to his flight from the battlefield of Pharsalus and his readiness to make a treasonous alliance with Parthia against Caesar's Rome. (This too is attested in historical sources).

But while the narrative exposes Pompey's faults, the intruding and apostrophizing commentator who is Lucan's most extraordinary innovation gives the defeated Pompey loyalty and admiration to the point of deification, and sends his immortal soul skywards, and thence into the breasts of the republican heroes. Bartsch is, I believe, the first critic to identify this conflict between narrative and commentator as the deliberate contradiction of his own knowledge by a poet determined to commit himself even to a cause long since betrayed. (But then so was Cato in book 2). Pompey is *noproficiens* painfully acquiring Stoic self-discipline, but the meeting point of "two Lucans": the rational ironist and the partisan against all reason: "Understanding this poem necessitates grasping the internal rift that has made the epic so difficult to reconcile to itself" (90-91). Lucan does not simply commit himself: Bartsch rightly stresses two of Lucan's apostrophes which also commit his readership; at 7.205-213 (quoted on 81, 92, 96-97) the poet tells Pompey on the brink of battle and defeat that, if his own toil can preserve the names of great men (and Pompey was called *Magnus*, or "The Great"), his war narrative will be read in suspense as if the outcome were still unknown, but men will always favor Pompey. As counterpart (133), when Caesar visits the ruins of Troy (9.980-86), Lucan apostrophizes Caesar, promising that "in the future men will read me and you: our Pharsalia will live and no age will condemn us to darkness." (Although the two passages could not be more pointed in their similarity, Bartsch argues cogently that Lucan speaks to Caesar here, not as "hero" of the narrative, but as author of the *Bellum Civile*.)

The apostrophe, so often criticized, turns out to have an important purpose, counteracting the impression provided by the text with a persona separate from the narrating poet: through its unprecedented frequency, the violence of its emotions, and, most provocatively, "the mixture of blindness and foreknowledge" (96), it dominates over the formal narrative. Bartsch expresses this most cogently: "Lucan ... presents us with an interpretive challenge, with work to be done in synthesizing the narrator's perspective and the conflicting conclusions we might draw from his text. We are not allowed to remain comfortable with either view for long ... Why?" (99). The question is answered in Bartsch's philosophically oriented fourth chapter ("The will to believe") using Rorty's studies of the modern intellectual predicament of unbelief, and the ironist who acknowledges the absence of rational grounds for belief but chooses to believe. If this act of faith is Lucan's informed choice, the "rift down the center of the poem" is not the fractured product of Lucan's confusion, but his constructive juxtaposition of opposing messages: the poet knows the struggle was over long before Pompey faced Caesar, but

must hope and strive for a renewal. Bartsch repeatedly cites (84, 115, 136) Cato's obituary, "true faith in liberty perished long since, when Sulla and Marius were welcomed back, / With Pompey's loss even false faith is gone" (9.204-5 in my translation).

In chapter 4, Bartsch returns to Cato and his paradoxes as citizen and Stoic sage, this time to single out the opposition between Cato's attitudes and Lucan's refusal of Stoic providentialism. But we could perhaps also usefully find another way of expressing the poet's choice which would link him to Cato's and to his uncle Seneca's active Stoicism. It is clear, as Bartsch notes, that Lucan held no Stoic delusion about cosmic benevolence, and observed no Stoic precepts of practicing dispassionate objectivity. But just as Lucan used the language of Stoic cosmology without the faith, so his will to commit his support to a past cause may spring from a Stoic upbringing that expected moral commitment; if he could not or would not commit himself to a virtuous and passion-free soul, he would justify himself by adherence to a cause which not only could not win but had already lost. Like the moral salvation of the Stoic sage, the moral fiction of the poet was independent of the unfree external world.

Historically, Cato fought because he was more a Roman and a political partisan than a Stoic, and he had reason to dread being under Caesar's power. In Lucan's epic, he chooses to take part in the war, rejecting quietism as a paradoxical kind of furor (2.295), where Bartsch rightly maintains the paradox against my own tamer reading of pudor. To hold aloof was to deny commitment, and Lucan's Cato is committed even to the name and empty shadow of liberty. Thus Cato, like Lucan, is embracing Ideology in Cold Blood (114: Bartsch's strange title remains unexplained, as far as I can check, until this point.)

I am less sure that Bartsch has hit on the real explanation of Lucan's syntactical tic of substituting positive for negative connections (123-30). Is he really "daring us to make sense of them by violating the letter of the text?" or has he merely subordinated the "ands" to the "nots" like bracketed mathematical terms inside a negative proposition?

Up to the final chapter, Bartsch has postponed the problem of history. Now, with Caesar, she takes the backward glance at ruined Troy and like Frederic Ahl's excellent *Lucan: an Introduction* (1976) (now regrettably out of print) shows how Lucan reflects in Troy both his (unhistorical) portrait of a ruined Italy, and his opening image of Pompey as decaying oak. Fiction operates with nomina, (both name and reputation) and she argues that Lucan's history is story, (*italicized*), "a biased and polemical account based on the subjective view of an individual ... it reasserts the individual's right to make sense out of his own past" (137).

We would not now accept a man or a nation's right to rewrite his history so as to deny or justify acts of oppression, yet a nation or man, particularly a young man, must have a version of history that will not paralyze him in inertia. If history is written by the victor improving his past record, a partisan of the defeated also needs to create his own story. What emerges as unique about Lucan is that he provides both the republican story and the chronicle of failures that belie it. But it is perhaps moving the goalposts to talk as Bartsch

does of "effective history." Her effective history comes close to either myth or protreptic rhetoric, but we would have discarded Lucan centuries ago if he had simply given us a gallery of republican saints to match his totalitarian villain.

As she approaches the end of this excellent literary study, Bartsch leads from her acute diagnosis of Lucan's polyphonic epic into a less convincing biographical hypothesis: was Lucan really steeling himself for a new beginning, action based on "belief before belief"? The feebleness of the Pisonian conspiracy and Lucan's own failure of action both suggest the usual myopic assassination without positive purpose. Rather we might hope that Lucan looked beyond this to the delayed but prolonged impact of his "story" on readers--not just post-Augustan but post-holocaust and post. postmodern, who would not forget Caesar, nor fail to favor Pompey. Read Bartsch but please (re-)read Lucan first.

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